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# Marriage Made in Heaven: 80-Year-Old Priest Teaches Generations of Students in Popular Class

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Oct. 2, 2003  
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## NEWS RELEASE

### **MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN: 80-YEAR-OLD PRIEST TEACHES GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS IN POPULAR CLASS**

DAYTON, Ohio — For the Rev. Norbert Burns, S.M., marriage is never stale.

The 80-year-old priest has taught a marriage course to an estimated 26,000 University of Dayton students — about a third of all alumni — in the past four decades. It's the most popular class at the Catholic university.

His priestly collar tucked casually in breast pocket, he bounds into class 15 minutes early so he can personally greet each student.

He's the Cal Ripken of the classroom. Incredibly, he's never missed a class in 58 years of teaching.

"I'm older than the grandparents of my students," jokes Burns, who so quickly engages students in lively discussions about marriage and relationships that they forget there's a generation gap. He rarely refers to notes and runs the fast-paced class in the style of talk show pioneer Phil Donahue.

"The students engage each other and me, and we constantly challenge one another," he says. "I'm very much a people person. I want to relate to people in the intimacy of their lives."

When Burns began teaching "Christian Marriage" at the University of Dayton in 1963, a majority of the seniors in the course were engaged. Today, he's lucky to find one or two engaged students among the 140 students enrolled in two sections of the class each semester.

"They talk up and express themselves. Students today are more forthcoming, but they're much more cautious these days about life commitment," he says, noting that the average age today for first marriages is 27 for women and 29 for men. "Thirty years ago, I was almost going to limit enrollment to engaged people."

How can a Catholic priest, someone who's never been married, become an expert on wedlock? "It's a profession independent of personal experience," he says. "Personal

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experience may get in the way. It gives you all kinds of biases and prejudices.”

With a quick smile, he adds: “Dr. Phil is not necessarily talking about his own life, but the principles of relationships.”

Burns is a professional marriage counselor with a doctoral degree in spirituality counseling from St. Thomas University in Rome with post-graduate work at Yale University. For 25 years, he hosted a local call-in radio show, “Challenge of Modern Day Marriage,” on WVUD-FM. He used to spend nearly every night until midnight in his campus office counseling couples, and he’d perform two or three weddings a week.

Though he officially “retired” in 1996, he still teaches the class. And he’s still passionate about marriage.

“We’re not made to be alone. We’re made to belong,” Burns says. “Friends are nice, but there’s nothing like having someone at your side on the mountaintops and in the valleys.”

He’s a strong proponent of building marriages on the bedrock of friendship. “If you don’t like the word ‘dating,’ that’s fine, but the more friendships you have helps you in the process of identifying yourself,” he tells the class. “Even if you get hurt, you learn a lot about life and love and hurt and pain. The best kind of preparation you can have for married life is how you are as a friend.”

His course tackles conventional wisdom and controversial topics. As students openly discuss the pros and cons of gay marriage during one recent class, Burns patiently leads the group to the position of the Catholic church. “In this class, we take a topic, weigh every side and go after each other,” he tells them. “Then you have to go live your life.”

Angie Shiley, a senior English major from Kalamazoo, Mich., says that Burns makes students “feel so comfortable that you can discuss any topic.”

Adds Anne Digman, a senior accounting major from St. Louis: “Some people say, ‘What does a priest know about marriage?’ He’s been in marriage counseling and can give us an unbiased opinion.”

Shiley sums up the enduring popularity of Burns’ course, whose power lasts over a lifetime. “We’re taking a whole semester to talk about the union of two people. It’s not enough. We’re going to take our whole lives to discuss this.”

Former students have created an endowed scholarship fund in Burns’ honor to award scholarships primarily to religious studies majors with financial need. To date, alumni have contributed \$38,000. For more information on the scholarship, call Ted Partlow at (937) 229-2901 or e-mail Theodore.Partlow@notes.udayton.edu.

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For media interviews, call **Father Norbert Burns** at (937) 229-4315 or Norbert.Burns@notes.udayton.edu. For assistance in scheduling an interview or talking to students, call **Teri Rizvi** at (937) 229-3241.

## HOW TO KEEP THE MARRIAGE BOND FROM UNRAVELING

The Rev. Norbert Burns, S.M., has taught "Christian Marriage" to an estimated 26,000 University of Dayton students over four decades. Here's a sampling of his time-tested advice to couples.

**1. Keep romance in your life. Set aside at least one night a month to go on a date.**

People get so absorbed in life with jobs and kids. You need to just let the world stop and be with each other. I suggest to young couples that if they don't have much money, to work out an exchange with other couples with children. Leave the children and just get away. Go take a walk along the river. We need highs in life. A couple needs a high. This is the high they give each other. I find that couples lose each other. You've heard of the empty nest syndrome? All of a sudden the children are gone and they look at each other and say, "Do I know you?"

**2. Be sincere and don't play games with each other.**

Especially the first year. The pattern you set the first year will carry through. Some couples say, "My parents fought all the time, and I don't want to do that." One just keeps swallowing feelings, or they both do. They're not being genuine with each other. They need to say, "This is how I feel, this is what's going on, this is what I want to share with you. How are we going to handle the in-laws and where are we going to spend Christmas?"

**3. Try to always keep humor in the relationship.**

I once asked a couple who had been married a long time to share their secret to marriage. It's a sense of humor. Nothing in life is perfect. No one is perfect. You have to expect things to go wrong, you don't make mountains out of a molehills, you put things in perspective. In humor, we're laughing together about something. You have to know the Achilles heal of the other person, to know when to tease.

**4. Know that there's an art and science to conflict resolution.**

Conflict resolution is a science. The art is practicing it. You have to know the rules. "You" is the most negative word you can use in an argument. Practice using the word "I." Say "I'm upset. I'm disturbed. I've had a bad day. I'm sharing with you my feelings." As soon as you get accusatory, the other person gets his or her back up and has to win.

Choose the right time to talk. Find the right place. Be alone with each other or otherwise we play games. There should be no diversions. You have to limit the time you talk, and eye contact is important.

There are three steps: 1) determine the specific concrete issue. Write it out and put it in front of yourselves. 2) Practice all the guidelines and techniques for good sharing. No one can talk for more than two minutes at a time, or else it becomes a lecture. No interruptions. 3) The one who brought up the issue says, "We've talked about it, now what are we going to do about it?"

**5. Identify who you are, your values and your professional goals before you get married.**

It's so important that you choose a partner whose professional life fits in with your goals and values. If you have a partner who doesn't want to go along for the ride, you're in trouble.

Too many people haven't found out who they are before they get married. They're not being genuine and hand the other person someone who's not really who they are. If a couple gets married in their teen-age years, it's almost a miracle if the marriage survives.